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Ana Mrđa *Editors*

# Cultural Urban Heritage

Development, Learning and Landscape  
Strategies



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# Chapter 28

## Revitalisation Models for Central European Country Houses

Boris Dundović, Mladen Obad Šćitaroci and József Sisa

**Abstract** A country house is a representative building which, apart from its residential function, also serves as a managerial focus for the wider estate. Throughout history, the representation, organisation, and management of a country house have served as complementary economic mechanisms that ensured that the seigniorial estate functioned as a (self-)sustaining system. After the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1918, life in Central European country houses started to decline progressively. The ensuing turbulent national, social, and political situations on the territory of the former empire left the majority of the country houses to oblivion and decay. However, after a long hiatus, interest in this type of built heritage in Central Europe has significantly increased in the last few decades. In the present-day economy, recognising and implementing suitable models of active use for the manors of the region has become a pressing issue. This chapter begins with a presentation of the historical models of alterations, and deliberates on the adequacy of their implementation today. It proposes contemporary architectural and conservation models of revitalisation and includes the urban and spatial planning models which can contribute to the rehabilitation of wider cultural landscapes in rural parts of Central Europe.

**Keywords** Contemporary models · Cultural landscape · Economic sustainability · Management · Manor house

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## 28.1 Introduction

The history of architecture teaches us that only adaptable building types can successfully overcome the intensity of the economic, national, social, and political vectors bestowed upon them. Country houses are an architectural type that successfully evolved from Roman *villae rusticae* and mediaeval burghs, ultimately reaching its peak in the nineteenth century. The adaptability of country houses as a specific architectural type in the span of over fifteen centuries is evident in many subtypes that arose from specific functional, spatial, and economic needs (manors, curiae, mansions, villas, homesteads, summer houses, just to name a few). Yet, their core mechanism has never changed and is deeply embedded in the definition: a country house is a representative building which, apart from its residential function, primarily serves as a managerial focus for the wider estate.

In Central Europe, country houses are somewhat smaller in scale than their British or French counterparts, but the intensity of their spatial significance and cultural value for their regions and their communities remains the same. Central European country houses can be categorised into two major types: a *manor house* is an architecturally rich dwelling or a building complex which represents the administrative focus of a large estate, while a *curia* presents a simpler building of more modest appearance without architectural lavishness and serves as the centre of a smaller estate or a smaller part of a larger one (Obad Šćitaroci and Bojanić Obad Šćitaroci 2006). Additionally, an architecturally elaborated house coupled with a smaller estate is a type often called a *mansion*. The size and shape of a country house and its estate may have varied, but its core substance has remained the same.

The continuity of country house culture during the turbulent twentieth century highly depended on the givens of its cultural region. For instance, life in Central European country houses started to decline after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1918, resulting in their abandonment and progressive decay, especially during and after the Second World War. It took half a century for general interest in country houses to re-emerge, but after such a long-lasting gap, their common public narrative and symbolic value changed. As a result, country houses are today often pictured as architectural remnants of a culture forcibly interrupted by the tumultuous events of the twentieth century. Just a small number of country houses successfully maintained their role of functional nodes (Dundović et al. 2015) in their immediate landscape, whereas others were left to decay and are now perceived mostly as ruins, as the romantic archaeology of a vanished culture. It is important to surmount these melancholic narratives and re-introduce country houses in their core definition, while providing them with a new life and purpose.

This research ponders the functional and spatial potentiality of country houses of the former Lands of the Crown of Saint Stephen, with special focus on the country houses in present-day Croatia and Hungary. The two countries are comparatively relevant not solely because their country houses belonged to the same cultural region at the time of building, but also due to their markedly different approach to build heritage conservation and, more precisely, to country house revitalisation. The research





## 28.2 Historical Models of Alteration and Expansion

Country houses in the course of their history rarely stayed the same. As living organisms, they usually reflected the changing needs of the owners, should that stem from the growth of the family, the increasingly elevated status of its head, or simply improvement due to a desire to have a more comfortable life. Just like any home, country houses were prone to constant change. This made them basically different from the other main traditional building type, churches, which tended to preserve more their original appearance and furnishings. This subchapter presents some formerly Transleithanian country houses where alterations and additions, for one reason or another, played a major role in their history.

Since construction had to be economical and no regulations tied the patrons' hands, pre-existing structures were often included in the new building. Count István Széchenyi, a Hungarian aristocrat especially interested in the theory and practice of country house building, summed it up in his book devoted to the subject in the following way: "In our country entirely new mansions are hardly ever built but, should the old home be the clumsiest and the least advantageously situated structure—no, only a simple, old wall—it will be the corner-stone, the trap of the new mansion for ever" (Széchenyi 1866). This characterisation may be exaggerated, but the fact remains that old country houses were seldom pulled down and whatever remained had to be re-used. And not only earlier homes but in some cases also other kinds of buildings were recycled into country houses. In Parádsasvár, earlier baths were incorporated into a house (Miklós Ybl, 1880–1882), in Horné Lefantovce (József Hubert, 1894) an old Pauline monastery was re-fashioned as a residence, along with the church now serving as the state hall. While remodelling, the builders usually (but not always!) took special care to disguise the old walls and create an entirely new-looking structure. Although this approach arose from the pragmatic use of existing structures instead of building them anew, these were the first attempts of the *integration model* in revitalisation, which kept the original building matter of the historical structure.

Remodelling sometimes seemed like reconstructing the former architecture and glory of an old building. In a way, such an operation anticipated what would later be called "restoration" in the nineteenth century. This was especially true of mediaeval structures and revived mediaeval styles, evident in efforts in the re-building of Bojnice Castle in an "authentic" mediaeval style (Sisa 2010). Here, the architect József Hubert had to restore, or rather freely recreate, mediaeval splendour in all the details, be it a sumptuous hall or just a small piece of furniture. Not surprisingly, contemporaries considered this operation a major project of building restoration. This *model of aesthetic enhancement*, along with the closely related *embellishment model*, is nowadays seen as outdated.

Otherwise, remodelling could be much more mundane and straightforward, and this was more typical. The purpose was to provide more space inside and a more modern appearance outside, regardless of the style of the pre-existing building. In the process, even relatively new mansions could be converted. This was the case



of the country house in Rum in western Hungary. Here, the original structure, built by Adorján Bezerédj, displayed neo-Renaissance architecture. Yet with the change of the owners, Count Károly Kornis found the building too small and probably not sumptuous enough, neo-Renaissance being identifiable much more with the middle classes than with the aristocracy. Thus, between 1898 and 1901 he had the country house remodelled in what his contemporaries called a mix of “mansard” and “burgstyl” (castle style), more compatible with his status and as a reference to his ancestral home in Manastirea, Transylvania. The castle in Manastirea featured several towers and bastions, and so did the newly rebuilt country house in Rum. In the eyes of the contemporaries, the tower served as a symbol of noble ancestry and even had a heraldic significance. In this case, the aesthetic enhancement was a result of the *spatial expansion model*. This model was more clearly applied to the old neo-Classical house of the Zichy family in Belezna, a single-storey building that had to be enlarged by the architect János Bobula Jr. in such a way that the walls and the rooms remained more or less intact. To conserve the original appearance, the intervention was carried out with the technical ingenuity of the period. Therefore, in this case, we can acknowledge the *model of architectural innovation* as well.

In the nineteenth century, the technology of comfort developed substantially; in fact, this was the time when its full range appeared. However, due to the scarcity of documents and the inevitable destruction of original technical features, it is difficult to establish general facts. Taking into account the financial power of the patron and the general quest for comfort, it seems safe to assume that older country houses also incorporated a substantial amount of modern technology. This involved the installation of indoor plumbing. Water tanks and water pipes would provide running water as well as the possibility of installing bathrooms and flushing toilets. Several eighteenth-century stately homes were modernised along these lines by the descendants of the original builders or by their new owners, thus inaugurating the *models of architectural and infrastructural modernisation*.

At the other end of the social spectrum and on a larger spatial scale, nouveau-riche patrons also built fashionable homes, sometimes in addition to industrial sites (Sisa 2010). It was not uncommon for a factory and a country house to form part of a single complex; thus, the owners' source of income and their homes, financed from those incomes existed side by side. It was only in the last decades of the nineteenth century that the spatial and structural alterations gave way to a new paradigm in the enhancement of manor management and estate productivity: the *functional models*. The *economic production model*, applied to the mansion of József Törley, is a case in point. Törley, a champagne manufacturer and an emblematic figure of the country after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, first built his champagne factory in 1888–1889 on the slopes of a hill in Budafok (now a suburb of Budapest). Incidentally, the site was identical to that of the by-then destroyed palace of Prince Eugene of Savoy. Some ten years later, he decided to build his mansion next to the factory. As a gesture of presence and of supervision, it looms over the factory. The choice of the style—French Gothic—was no accident; it obviously referred to the country where champagne was invented. Like a feudal lord, József Törley invariably employed a “house architect”, Lajos Rezső Ray, and then, after the latter's death,



his son, Vilmos Rezső Ray. The son was responsible for building the mansion in Budafok in the vicinity of the factory.

In sum, alterations and expansions were always an integral part of country house building and management of estates. They made the houses both more modern and more comfortable, and the estates more functional. Throughout history, Central European country houses were steadily enhanced according to the specific needs of the period, which ensured the continuity of their life in the ever-changing times.

## 28.3 Architectural and Conservation Models

After a long hiatus in the active life of country houses, marked by the ensuing turbulent national, social, and political situations in the territory of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire present during most of the second half of the twentieth century, interest in this type of built heritage in Central Europe has significantly grown over the last few decades. With the increased interest, the number of revitalisation endeavours has also increased. Therefore, in the present-day economy and tourism of Croatia and Hungary, recognising and implementing suitable and efficient models of active use for manors in the region has become a pressing issue.

In terms of the contemporary life of country houses and the surrounding estates as their immediate spatial complement, there are two major categories of architectural and conservation models for revitalisation: the *spatio-structural* and *functional models*. It is, however, important to underline that, in this categorisation, both architectural and conservation models do not hinder the development, but rather provide enhancement mechanisms which efficiently recognise the potential of economic sustainability while considering the identity factors such as the functional significance of a country house, its authentic features, and cultural value (Obad Šćitaroci et al. 2006).

### 28.3.1 *Spatio-Structural Models*

Numerous historical examples of models listed in the previous subchapter show that physical transformation regularly provided country houses with a new or enhanced active life. Apart from some of the models that are outdated (such as *embellishment* and *aesthetic enhancement*), most of them can be positively applied today.

In terms of conservation, spatio-structural models coincide with practical methods of the same terminology. The *restoration model* includes all the methods that replace the decayed or damaged elements while simultaneously preserving the original matter of a country house or its estate. It serves “the preservation of the original in the form in which it has come down to us, with its various layers and with its outstanding as well as its seemingly secondary or insignificant components” (Petzet 2004). Nádasdy Manor in Nádasdladány, Hungary, and Trakošćan Castle in Hrvatsko Zagorje, Croatia, are



**Fig. 28.2** Nádasdy Manor in Nádasdladány, Hungary (left), and Trakošćan Castle in Hrvatsko Zagorje, Croatia (right). *Photos by B. Dundović*

both successful examples of the restoration model applied to the architecture and the surrounding landscape garden of a country house (Fig. 28.2). However, this specific model allows no significant transformation of the original structure, historical material, or physical features, and can therefore be suitable mostly to former country houses functioning as museums.

The *reconstruction model* is a more appropriate choice for country houses or their elements that are severely damaged or lost. It is suitable for architecture or landscapes that have irretrievably lost their original structure or features. It is a model that tries to preserve the original spatiality and atmosphere, although some or all of the elements lack the authenticity of matter. Such an example is Eltz Mansion in Vukovar, Croatia, which was severely damaged during the war in the 1990s but has been successfully reconstructed.

On the other hand, if a country house needs to accommodate a function that requires visible physical intervention or a structural transformation, the *model of physical transformation* makes for a more appropriate approach, as it relies on the creation of new concepts. An example of this model is the reconstruction of Janković Manor in Suhopolje, Croatia, which uses historical facts to reconstruct the estate layout and spatial concept of the edifices, while compensating for some of the missing outbuildings with contemporary structures. Contemporary architectural interventions complete the spatial needs of the new function—a hotel. Another similar example is Forgách Castle in Halič, Slovakia, now a hotel and spa centre, where the roof structure was reconstructed and modernised with a contemporary addition of a glass structure covering the inner courtyard. A physical transformation model can include: alteration, interpretation, retrofitting, modernisation, innovation, remodelling, architectural compensation, and contemporary intervention (architectural, structural, and/or infrastructural).



### 28.3.2 Functional Models

These models are the sets of roles country houses and their estates can assume and further intensify, along with the fundamental definition of the managerial focus of the estate. Mentioned in the subchapter above, we saw that Central European manors of the late nineteenth century had already started implementing several *economic models* applicable today: the *economic production model* when a manor house becomes the focus of production activity, the *business model* when it becomes a node of the service industry, and the *administrative model* when it is important to establish a managerial focus for several displaced instances of the same holding. Apart from the already mentioned Törley Estate in Budafok, Hungary, which today functions as a champagne and wine factory, there are several vineyard manors in Croatia that are also recognisable emblems for the products of their estates: for instance, the historical Belaj Manor and winery near Cerovlje in Istria (Fig. 28.3), the manor house in Bilje, which historically served as a hunting lodge of Prince Eugene of Savoy in Slavonia, or Turković Manor in Kutjevo, where the tradition of wine-making dates back to Roman times (Obad Šćitaroci and Bojanić Obad Šćitaroci 2001).

In relation to country houses, the repetition of historic functions does not imply redundancy but rather a synthesis of didactic information on historical layers and the creative potential of active use today. By simulating the historical mechanisms, we subject the vanished life of a country house to revision (Deleuze 1994, p. 212), thus exposing it to dynamic and productive processes of creative evolution, and ultimately intensifying it as an active participant in the present-day economy. This inherently creative repetition provides us with three main models: the *presentation model* and the *exhibition model*, which show former country-house life or its fragments, and the *revival model* which is the most authentic and most comprehensive of the three, but also economically the most inefficient. Veliki Tabor is a castle in Hrvatsko Zagorje, Croatia, where all three models are apparent: it presents the authentic original condition of the structure, exhibits the historical artefacts, and revives the scenes of former manorial life for visitors.



Fig. 28.3 Belaj Manor with its outbuildings and vineyards in Istria, Croatia. Photo by Belaj Winery

Other types of *tourism models* include the *therapeutic and medicinal model*, the *sport model*, the *leisure model*, and the *accommodation model*. For instance, the manor house in Balf, located near Sopron in Hungary, serves as a hotel for visitors of medicinal baths. The Janković Curia in Kapela Dvor near Virovitica in Croatia is, on the other hand, a heritage hotel adjacent to the transboundary biosphere reserve of the Drava, Mura and Danube rivers protected by UNESCO, offering recreational and learning activities.

With respect to their specific spatial syntax and, especially, the interdependence of interior and exterior space, country houses and their immediate surroundings can often be convenient for educational purposes. The *education*, *teaching*, and *academic models* are all complementary socio-functional models. One example where an elementary school located in a country house provides the historical structure with continuous care is Wenckheim Manor in Doboz near Békéscsaba, Hungary, with its facilities surrounded by a nature reserve. However, when deliberating upon a country house as an intensive node of knowledge dissemination, two contemporary models of utmost learning intensity need mentioning: the *research model* and the *science model*. A fine example of this approach is Bračak Manor near Zabok, Croatia, which was re-purposed and re-constructed as the energy centre and business incubator of the North-West Croatia Regional Energy Agency, consisting of offices, workshops, and presentation rooms for start-up companies in the field of energetics.

Although the majority of country houses in Hungary and Croatia are today re-constructed or re-stored due to individual efforts, the total number of successful results in manor revitalisation in Hungary significantly outweighs the Croatian efforts. However, there are two essential differences in the approach to manor revitalisation: (a) the Hungarian government implemented the National Mansion Programme, which presently includes 45 country houses and encourages “participatory planning in the project implementation process in the future in order to maximize the positive socio-economic impacts of cultural heritage” (Lazányi et al. 2016, p. 109); and (b) not all country houses in Hungary are viewed as historic monuments of larger cultural significance (for instance, only 5 of 45 country houses currently in the Programme are protected as historic monuments), which enables the efficient integration of contemporary intervention and historical layers to ensure the active revitalisation in present-day economic conditions (Nemzeti Kastély-és Várprogram 2016). The National Mansion Programme guarantees that authentic factors of identity will be conserved while a new active function is implemented, by including historical research and situation analysis, tourism impact assessment, international outlook, and benchmarking studies of cultural routes, clusters, feasibility, and funding (Fekete 2016). Without a doubt, country houses are functional nodes of a cultural region, but to acquire the necessary active intensity, they have to be deliberated upon as constituents of wider spatial systems (Dundović et al. 2015), which can be actualised by urban, landscape, and spatial planning models.



## 28.4 Urban, Landscape, and Spatial Planning Models

Country house complexes are factors of identity for a wider cultural landscape, and any proposed revitalisation model should consider the context of the region or area in which they emit their cultural significance. Croatian and Hungarian country houses are the result of spatial, natural, and cultural factors of the former Habsburg Monarchy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire which lasted until 1918, and their intraregional connections are thus “the basis for planning of the wider areas beyond national borders” (Dundović et al. 2015). Considering a country house as a focal node in the interconnected cultural network of a wider area, a number of model groups can be discussed: for instance, *urban planning models*, *landscape models*, *spatial models*, and *socio-cultural models*.

### 28.4.1 Urban Planning Models

Urban planning models provide tools for the planned programming of country house revitalisation in a region or a wider area. It is of great relevance whether a manor house is part of the urban fabric within, on the edge or outside the urban area of a settlement. Country houses are powerful urban generators, and for this reason it should be taken into consideration whether a settlement surrounding the country house (and its estate) historically existed or whether their urbanity is a present-day condition. For example, Janković Manor in Daruvar, Croatia, was an intensive generator of the urban condition for the town. It served as a managerial focus of several family estates in Central Slavonia but, as it was built adjacent to ancient Roman *thermae*, it encouraged the building of the town's thermal spa complex, which ultimately dictated its urban growth. Therefore, the country house with its surrounding garden is today located in the very centre of Daruvar. Urban planning models always need to consider the spatial relation of a country house to other structures of cultural functions and create a system of nodes connected with streets, pedestrian promenades, or even parks and gardens. However, due to their accessibility, manors which are part of urban structures are more adept at accepting active functions than those in the countryside.

### 28.4.2 The Landscape Model

The landscape model includes both a country-house complex or estate and its surrounding landscape. Two major questions arise when deciding upon appropriate tools of intervention: Is there a traffic connection and what are the specific elements of visual recognisability? The manorial landscape garden usually differs in structure and colour from the surrounding natural vegetation, making it easier to distinguish the country house as an authentic element of a landscape, even if it is not

instantly visible. Therefore, the *landscape model* means that architectural intervention is always minimal, and attention is aimed primarily at the gardens, landscape gardens and forested area as places of recreation, sport, and leisure. Furthermore, the closely related *arboricultural model* involves the affirmation of landscape culture in the form of an arboretum. Along these lines, the country house can be the scene of garden and landscape exhibitions or a nursery garden for old varieties of plants. There are numerous historical country house arboretums with elaborated botanical concepts, such as the one surrounding Erdődy Manor in Vép, Hungary, with species imported from England, France, and Italy (Sisa 2007), or Hillebrand-Mailáth Manor in Donji Miholjac, Croatia, with 110 species of trees and shrubs (Obad Šćitaroci and Bojanić Obad Šćitaroci 2001). Gardens and landscape gardens are both historical and contemporary elements of country house revitalisation, and we often forget that they are an integral part of the manorial estate, as important as the manor house itself.

### 28.4.3 *Spatial Models*

Spatial models are intended for the wider spatial context of a country house. The relation of a country house estate to its surrounding area or region is activated primarily by traffic connections and the proximity of settlements. The spatial framework of the area also includes all the other neighbouring manorial estates, as they can be arranged in spatial or functional systems such as a manor network, manor ring, and manor sequence. The *manor network model* includes country houses of a spatial unit (for instance, Central Slavonia in Croatia or Northern Balaton in Hungary), of the same stylistic features (e.g. Baroque manors of Hrvatsko Zagorje in Croatia), of the same cultural route (e.g. along ancient wine roads), or according to means of transport (e.g. several manor houses near Zaprešić, Croatia, are easily visited within a day on foot), or because they belonged historically to the same owner family (e.g. manors and curiae of the Janković family from Lake Balaton in Hungary to Central Slavonia in Croatia). The *manor ring model* is a system of country houses that encompasses bigger towns or cities (e.g. the manor ring around Zagreb, Croatia). Accordingly, its linear variant is supported by the *manor sequence model*.

### 28.4.4 *Socio-Cultural Models*

Socio-cultural models include all means of collective social and cultural significance of a country house in a region or area, whether it is of local or regional relevance. This is a set of mostly immaterial models that exert greater economic impact by introducing a country house as a subjective signifier. For example, the *representation model* was historically reserved for the owner family (as a representation of their power) but today it is important for the local community culture to make the country house an emblematic and recognisable element of the cultural landscape. A local



community often uses the *participatory model*, while corporations and industries rely on the *institutional model* (where the manor house becomes a visual signifier of an institution or a product). It is important to apply the *contingent model*, where all the country houses of a network work together to produce a succession of events in a certain period (for example, manor houses along Lake Balaton that provide tourists with a continuous succession of events in the summer months). Ultimately, due to ownership issues and other legal problems that often arise, it is important to use the *legislative model* (in the form of laws and acts provided by the state) to solve any legal problem blocking the further development.

## 28.5 Conclusion

It is usually understood that country houses, as any other types of monuments, “are designed to resist the forces of time in order to preserve and project a particular inflection of selected memories”, which implies “an underlying idea that the event can be preserved in the material as long as the object persists” (Hale 2017). However, a country house (especially a Central European one) was historically a place of constant transformation, alteration, and reconsideration in order to accommodate new ideas and new concepts of active life on the estate. Since country houses are today also architectural documents of past times, we are additionally tasked to preserve their authenticity, integrity, and identity. Keeping this in mind, whichever of the presented historical or contemporary models we apply to a specific country house, the historic manor with its estate should never be a hindrance, but rather a node of potentiality, that is, a generator of local economic development.

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